



COMMENTARY

# Changing the Course: Reflections on Turnaround at New Bedford Public Schools (MA)

*by Dr. Pia Durkin*

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for the long haul, and together,  
we would stay the course  
regardless of the challenges.  
Together, we are "in it to win it."*

# Changing the Course:

## *Reflections on the Turnaround at New Bedford Public Schools (MA)*

*Dr. Pia Durkin*

**D**uring my first few months as superintendent of New Bedford Public Schools, I met with many community members in a variety of forums, but one particular conversation brought home the magnitude of the challenge ahead. A community member, who proudly told me she had lived in New Bedford for over 20 years and was a proud homeowner, listened to my vision for building the future of the New Bedford Public Schools. When she heard me say that turnaround work was not for everyone and that some administrators and teachers would likely choose to leave, she looked at me and said, “But if people leave, who will want to come here?” At that moment, it became very clear to me that a massive shift in district culture would be needed to help New Bedford become an excellent school district for its children and families. It became equally clear that to reach the kids, the adults had to believe that an excellent school district was a real possibility for New Bedford.

Committed to urban education and always up for tackling a challenge, I was intrigued by the opportunity to manage a turnaround situation and to make a significant impact on students’ lives. Thus, I pursued the opportunity at New Bedford Public Schools, and in July 2013, I assumed the superintendency.



Based on a review of the district's performance, the Massachusetts Commissioner of Education had already designated New Bedford Public Schools (NBPS) a Level 4, "underperforming" district. In addition, early in my first year, New Bedford High School was downgraded to a Level 4 school and the Parker Elementary School was downgraded to a Level 5 school. With 26 schools and almost 13,000 students, 75% of whom were on free and reduced lunch, New Bedford Public Schools was among the lowest performing districts in the state. The district had the lowest graduation rates in the state at 60%, little growth in student performance over the past few years, and was teetering on the brink of being designated a Level 5, "chronically underperforming" district, which would signal state receivership.

As the fourth superintendent in five years, I knew that I had challenges ahead. New Bedford had tried virtually every academic intervention you can name, but with little success. I knew there would be much work to do to improve teaching and learning and to increase the capacity of teachers and leaders across the district. But more urgent challenges than I had even imagined awaited me:

multiple lawsuits against the district were pending; tensions abounded between central office and the schools; an often antagonistic relationship had existed between the superintendent and the school committee; eight principal positions were vacant; two business managers had recently resigned, and the business office lacked staff with the appropriate skills; the human resource office was manned by a head clerk who had a paper filing system to maintain employee records; and, after a long vacancy, a new facilities manager had just been hired for a district with the state's largest stock of 90-year-old buildings. As I stepped into my office on July 1, I also had to deal with the aftermath of a \$3 million budget deficit discovered during the 2012-13 school year, which resulted in programs being disbanded and extensive staff layoffs that impacted virtually every program and service in the district.

When I accepted the position, I had felt energized to tackle a turnaround and to make a difference for this district and community; but within a few short months, I realized the challenges before me were more than I ever could have imagined. Yet, I was determined to have

## DR. PIA DURKIN

### Superintendent



New Bedford Public Schools (MA)

**July 2013–present**



**2006–2013**

Superintendent  
Attleboro Public  
Schools (MA)



**2004–2006**

Associate Director  
Annenberg Institute for  
School Reform at Brown  
University



**2003–2004**

Superintendent  
Narragansett Public  
Schools (RI)



**1999–2003**

Assistant Superintendent  
of Special Education, Guidance, and  
Other Unified Student Services  
Boston Public Schools (MA)



**1992–1998**

Special Education Director  
Providence Public Schools (RI)



M.A. and Ph.D.,  
New York University



B.A. Queens College,  
Elementary Education

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an impact here, and rolled up my sleeves and dug in. Now, as we are approaching the end of our third year and NBPS is deep into turnaround work, we are finally getting evidence that the district is on the move. While I am very proud of our accomplishments thus far, I know we still have a tremendous amount of hard work ahead of us.

### **Building Support**


One of the keys to weathering the persistent and often overwhelming challenges I faced as leader of a turnaround district was my relationship with the school committee, the Mayor, and the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). I could not have made such bold and courageous moves without the strong support of these important parties.

The school committee and the superintendent had often been at odds in the past, but this school committee had made the decision to hire me and clearly wanted a superintendent who would lead change. But I knew that I could not take this as a given, and that sustaining their support would require transparency and frequent communication. An essential part of my role has been to keep members of the school committee informed. I have made a practice of scheduling individual meetings with committee members; though time-consuming,

this has been key to sustaining their support. Not only do these meetings allow me to hear and gauge their concerns, but they provide an opportunity for committee members to ask questions that they may be reluctant to ask in public. I give them the facts and data where applicable, share very candidly my thoughts and reasoning, and invite questions and encourage difficult discussions so that concerns can be aired openly. My objective, at a minimum, is for there to be no surprises for members of the committee; at best, I hope to gain their support and equip them with the information to make their support of me highly defensible. I invest in these relationships in order to build the trust that is needed to make hard decisions and weather the storms that inevitably arise.

Similarly, with the Mayor and DESE, it is critical not only to keep the lines of communication open, but to create opportunities for candid discussion. While all parties want to see the district make a successful turnaround and improve results for the students of New Bedford, conflicting interests come into play. DESE's interest is in supporting the turnaround and seeing results as quickly as possible. The Mayor has the same objectives, but he has to answer to his various constituent groups and manage the politics surrounding each and every position he takes. Because there had been a string of superintendents who preceded me, the school committee, the Mayor, district leaders, and DESE had grown used to working in isolation from one another. As a new superintendent stepping onto a stage where many prior superintendents had failed, I had to make it clear that any decisions or plans involving New Bedford Public Schools needed to involve me and that everyone should look to me to lead where it concerns public education in New Bedford. Maintaining this alignment and communication has been time-consuming and complicated work, but essential to the success of our turnaround efforts.

The support of all these parties proved important when, in January 2014, DESE named me the receiver for Parker Elementary School. Earlier in the school year, this school had been named a Level 5 school, but I became the only superintendent in the state to be named a receiver. Due to the trust and alliances I had established with the school



committee and the Mayor as well as DESE, this news was favorably received by all these stakeholders.

I would be remiss not to mention how fortunate I have been to be working with the District Management Council (DMC) as the plan manager hired by DESE. DMC has provided tremendous support and has been an important partner in this turnaround. They helped me develop the general improvement plan for the district, and their team rolled up their sleeves and helped me with a great deal of blocking and tackling, particularly in the first year, while always keeping an eye to building capacity within the district. DMC helped me manage both the Level 4 turnaround plan for the high school and the Level 5 turnaround plan for the Parker School. They also managed all the monitoring work and collection of evidence that the district needed for accountability purposes. The team helped to define what rigorous instruction looked like and devised tools to assess each principal's understanding of rigorous instruction. Through this work on rigor and my persistent focus with principals on the quality of instruction in each and every classroom, teaching and learning has become a central focus of our turnaround efforts. The team at DMC was an important outside partner that helped support me through a very challenging transition.

### **Leading with Confidence in the Face of “No Confidence”**

An essential factor to a successful turnaround is showing strong leadership and establishing one's place and authority as superintendent. I needed the support of key players and worked hard to create these alliances, but it was important for me to assert myself and assume my role as leader of the district.

On May 8, 2014, the New Bedford Educators Association, for the second time, put my leadership to the test. They took a no confidence vote, and this time the majority called for my resignation. I immediately made it very clear that I absolutely would not resign. As a testament to the trust and support I had been cultivating, the school committee, the Mayor, State Education Commissioner Mitchell Chester, and a growing segment of the community all stood by me. In fact, the no

confidence vote created the opportunity for all these parties to step forward and articulate their support for what they referred to as the “bold” plan that we had embarked upon and to affirm their confidence in my leadership and the reforms we were undertaking. This strengthened my resolve to stay the course and work with staff willing to reinvent themselves in order for our plan to come to fruition.

It took until March of 2015, nearly two years into my superintendency, for me to solidify my working relationship with the president of the New Bedford Educators Association. Our disagreements, which were both frequent and intense, began as soon as I became superintendent, and the adversarial nature of our relationship made progress extremely difficult. In the winter of 2014–15, our struggles came to a head. In a frank conversation, I let him know that I wanted to work with him to make the New Bedford Public Schools a better place for students and teachers; this was his chance to take part in leading the change rather than seeing it happen to him. I told him, “One day I will be standing on the steps of the White House being recognized for the success in New Bedford. You can be there by my side, or you can be watching at home.” After months of negotiations, in March 2015, we stood side-by-side and announced a breakthrough. Teachers would have more professional development time, and there would be new processes and timelines for hiring teachers each spring.

The school budgeting process also presented significant challenges during my first two years in New Bedford. The city had historically operated with the minimum school funding required by the state, and there was little confidence that investing more money in the school system would produce better results. But, to effect a turnaround, a massive influx of resources was needed to support teaching and learning. In 2014, my budget request went well beyond the required school spending, including funding for a new K-5 reading program and resources for the high school and Parker turnaround plans. For the first time in anyone's memory, funding above the state's required school spending was approved. We won support for a \$7 million increase to our school budget with \$3 million to cover turnaround plans at New Bedford High School and the John A. Parker School, \$2.4 million for salary increases, and

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\$1.2 million for longer school days. The business manager and I weathered almost four hours of questions. A City Council member said to me afterwards, “We are going to get killed, but you are going to get the support you need.”

### Creating a Team and Cultivating Talent

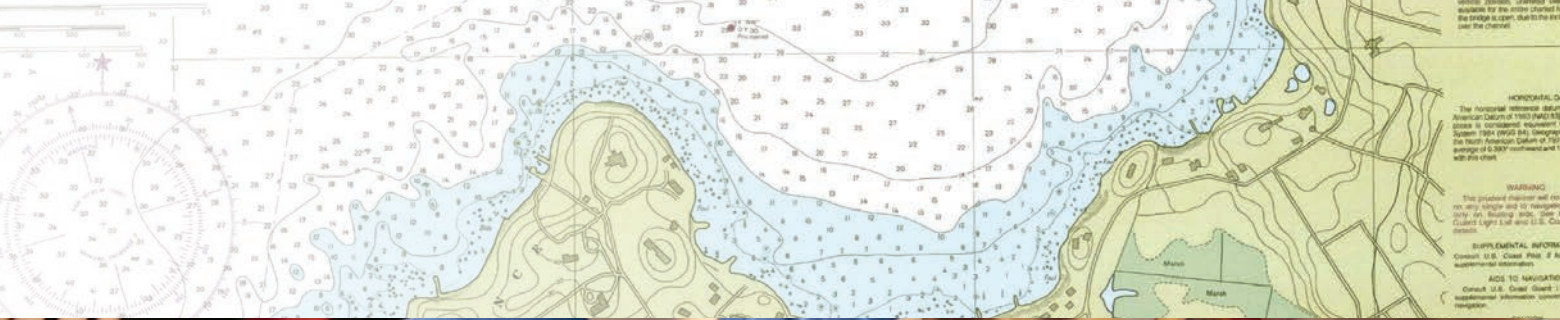
Despite the support I have had from the school committee, the Mayor, and DESE, one of the most significant challenges of my new position has been creating a team and attracting and cultivating talent. As is often the case, I came into the district alone, and did not bring my own team with me. Getting to know the staff in the district and forging a team that united the leadership at both the central office and the school level to lead rapid, transformational change was perhaps my most significant challenge.

I discovered a central office lacking many of the needed skills and often working at odds with the principals. The principals had not felt involved in decision-making, and experienced a very bureaucratic, top-down approach from central office leaders. With so much work needed in the schools, finding time to build a new central office

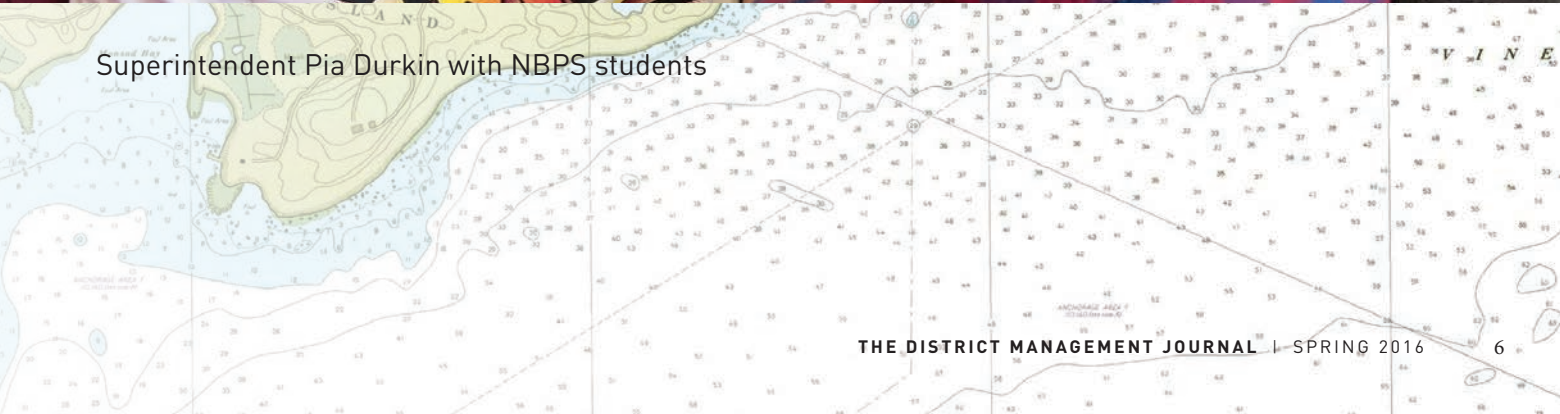
staff proved to be time-consuming and challenging. But our ability to make rapid progress depended on strong district-level leadership. I had to scramble in my first year to fill numerous positions in the business and human resources departments. In all, over my first three years of turnaround work in New Bedford, I replaced virtually all the senior-level leaders in the central office with new leadership committed to our turnaround work.

It was also critical for me to find principals who had both the “will and skill” to take on this very difficult work. Rather than the traditional posting and advertising, I used my state-wide network to find talent. Though the geography of the region was a challenge, my biggest barrier was the reputation of the district itself. The district had for so long seen itself as failing that even quality candidates from within the schools were averse to stepping up to take on leadership roles. Recruiting conversations were less about how low performing the district was or where it was and more about IF the conditions were ripe for change. I continually emphasized that this was an incredible opportunity to “be part of the successful turnaround story of New Bedford.” My original belief that





Superintendent Pia Durkin with NBPS students



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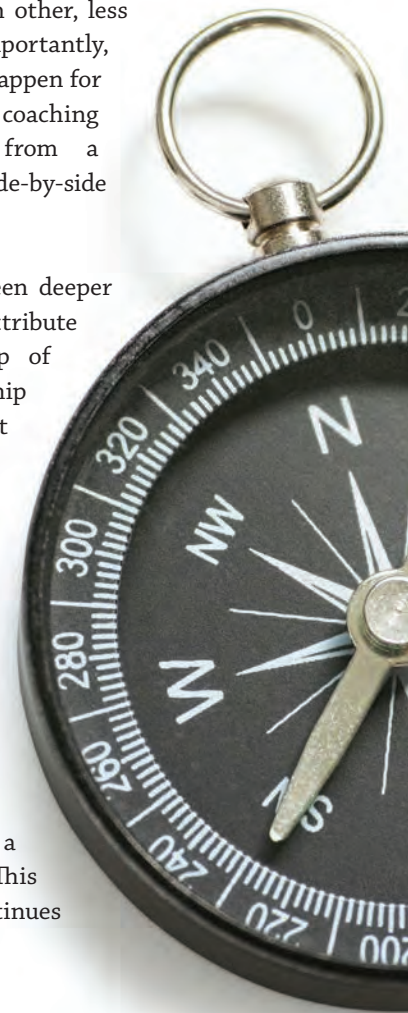
“turnaround work was not for everyone” proved to be true. Some new hires were not up for the challenges that faced the schools. And I learned that above all, urban experience was key to success and, if not urban experience, there had to be a keen understanding of the challenges of an urban district.

As I slowly rebuilt central office and the principal ranks, it became clear that it would be necessary for me to work with principals to jumpstart the turnaround process. By working directly with principals, I believed that I had a shot at changing district culture because each principal affects dozens of adults who affect hundreds of children. This work was the right work. I talked candidly with principals who had been in the district for years. I made it clear in my first year that both will and skill were required of those who stayed. Those who stayed would be leaders who accepted no excuses, and were invested in the future of New Bedford’s children. Many school leaders were honest enough to tell me what they did not know, and what they had tried to do with their schools. They spoke with passion and shared their experiences of how bad decisions had led the district to its current state. They were candid about their own inadequacies and called me often to ask questions. Others gave countless examples of why their schools were not improving, and clearly had very low

expectations for the adults and students in their buildings. They used factors of poverty, language barriers, and special education needs as reasons for their schools’ doing so poorly. With those conversations, I quickly learned who had the skill and the will to engage in the deep, challenging work needed to turn around the New Bedford Schools.

Over three years, I’ve found many of the right leaders so that today the district has leaders with the grit, the determination to learn, and the willingness to apply and adapt what they know to our unique circumstances. Of the 26 principals in place when I arrived in the district three years ago, six remain today. Nine of the current school and district leaders came from within, and three leaders returned to New Bedford after having worked in other, less challenging districts. Most importantly, they all believe excellence can happen for urban kids. They are open to coaching and intensive supervision from a superintendent who works side-by-side with them.

Each year, our progress has been deeper and more accelerated, and I attribute that to the expanding group of leaders who have taken ownership of the turnaround work. My first year, I had to rely heavily on DMC as an outside partner, because the district did not have the capacity, and many of the staff had not bought into the need for change. Last year, many new hires in the central office and many experienced principals began to come together regularly to review progress on their assigned initiatives, and a great deal was accomplished. This year, an expanded group continues





to advance the work, meeting regularly not only to review progress against our plan, but to review data and verify that the work is having an impact for students. Our leadership at the central office and building level have the resilience, the commitment, and the skill to succeed in raising achievement for some of the Commonwealth's neediest students.

## Lessons Learned

Reflecting on the challenges and progress made in my first three years in New Bedford, I find many lessons that will inform my leadership actions in the future. What is clear is that a district in crisis needs bold change and a steady hand to guide that change. Here are some of the most important lessons I've learned thus far:

- Improved outcomes for students cannot be gained or sustained without confronting the culture of the district that created the failure in the first place. Low expectations for student learning as well as low expectations for adult performance must be challenged at every turn.
- It takes the entire community to improve a school system. Partnerships with stakeholders both inside the school district and in the community are critical. These partnerships build hope and create confidence in teachers and leaders; they provide political cover for bold change; and they often generate additional resources that are needed to support the turnaround efforts.
- The knowledge and skill of teachers and leaders underpin all improvement. Without highly skilled teachers, students do not make progress. Without effective principals and



Superintendent Pia Durkin walking to school with students and parents

leaders, teachers do not improve their craft and turnaround is not possible. When the talents of teachers and leaders are focused on common, rigorous expectations for student learning, improvement will follow.

- Leadership exists in all corners of the district. In addition to central office and principal leaders, teacher leaders can help bring improved teaching to the classroom. And teachers' voices must be at the forefront of decision making when making changes. Fostering teacher leadership—with a large and a small *L*—can be a powerful lever to create district turnaround.
- Politics play a role in urban education. Strong leaders need to accept the politics, pay attention to them, and manage them without compromising core values.

Lastly, there are many moving parts in district turnaround that need to be tackled at once. Leading the work with a strong hand and unflinching, relentless tenacity are fundamental.

## Results and Next Steps

The district's efforts and strategy are starting to produce results. There are indicators that the overall focus on leadership, curriculum, and instruction is taking hold. On the spring 2015 PARCC assessment, results showed 16 out of 22



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schools increasing in statewide percentile rankings (the 22 schools do not include the high school, two alternative schools, and one school that closed). Two of the 22 tested schools showed flat results, while four schools declined. Overall, New Bedford students grew to the 51st percentile in statewide growth on the English Language Arts exam, outgrowing more than half of the districts in the Commonwealth from the prior year. In mathematics, students grew to the 48th percentile. The English Language Arts growth rate grew by 11 percentile points from the year prior, while the math results climbed 6 percentile points.

At New Bedford High School, the five-year adjusted graduation rate has climbed to over 70% for the first time in the school's history. The high school team has doubled down on their efforts to strengthen classroom instruction for all students, and has designed a series of additional pathways to help students reach new credit requirements under the new Massachusetts High School Program of Studies (MassCore).

The challenge of turnaround is that a multitude of leadership and management issues must be tackled, but taking these on all at once can seem overwhelming. It takes persistence and steady and consistent leadership to make progress on these issues. In the spring of 2015, I asked the school committee to renew my contract a year early, extending it to 2019 as a signal to the community that I was committed to New Bedford. The school committee endorsed my request with a 7-0 vote of confidence. This sent a strong message to the community and to my staff that I was in this turnaround work for the long haul and that together we would stay the course regardless of the challenges. Together we are “in it to win it.” ♦